

Minutes of DAAC Meeting

Attendance

DAAC members present were Seren Derin, Chair; Joe Tringali, Vice-chair; Irene Barrelet, Clerk; Joan Rising; Dana Goddard and Jim MacRostie.

Others present were Nathaniel Malloy, DAAC staff liaison; and members of the public Jane Gamache.

Call to Order

Chair Seren Derin called the meeting to order at 3:07 p.m.

Announcements

Ms. Derin suggested that Mr. Weiss be contacted to determine if he is still the Select Board representative to the DAAC.

Ms. Derin recommended that the Town Manager revoke Mr. Andrade's membership, as he is continually absent from meetings without responding to correspondence.

Ms. Rising arrived a bit late, and expressed concern that Stavros lacked clear directional signs that would help guide visitors to the main entrance and parking lots. Ms. Derin said she would discuss the matter with staff from Stavros.

Minutes

Minutes from the December, 2008 meeting were reviewed and discussed. No corrections were found. Mr. MacRostie made a motion to accept the minutes; Mr. Tringali seconded the motion, and the vote was unanimous to accept the December 2008 minutes as submitted.

Benches in front of St. Brigid's Church

Mr. Malloy explained that at a recent meeting of the Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee (PTBC), members expressed concern that there was not enough space between the benches for a person in a wheelchair to sit. Mr. Tucker, Planning Director, emailed Mr. Malloy and others involved, explaining that before the PTBC scrutinize the project, an opinion from the DAAC would be appropriate. Mr. Malloy relayed Mr. Tucker's email, in which he explained,

"They [the benches] were designed for all passersby, not specifically to serve a given bus stop, though these two were set opposite a potential bus stop location. I believe it was assumed that if this became a permanent bus stop, it would acquire a shelter with its own seating, and seating under cover might be considered more appropriate and comfortable for people in wheelchairs than benches exposed to the elements.

Further, it was assumed throughout the Town Center streetscape improvement designs that people in wheelchairs who wished to use the benches, would either: 1) if they were able, transfer from their chairs to the benches (which were deliberately provided with arms, to help accommodate people with limited mobility), or 2) they would park their chairs in the 'eddy spaces' on either side of the sidewalk 'travel lane'—most benches are sited in those locations, where there is ample room for wheelchairs to park in

proximity. Even in this location, there is ample area east of the ‘travel lane’ of the sidewalk for people in wheelchairs to park, including areas next to street trees which provide summer shade. The travel lane is eight feet wide, which is close enough to the benches on the west side to allow for conversation, if that is the PTBC’s purpose. No one, including the wheelchair users on the DAAC who were intimately involved in developing the design of this area, considered it necessary to provide space between these particular benches for wheelchairs to park.”

Mr. Tringali responded that this issue is a low priority in terms of transportation and getting around the town center. He believed the focus and energy of the PTBC, especially during the winter, should be keeping sidewalks cleared of snow and curb cuts free of ice.

Ms. Derin noted that these benches are not bus stops, but public benches with enough sidewalk space surrounding them that persons in a wheelchair can sit nearby. She recommended that if new bus stops are installed, that they are accessible for all, with appropriate seating and shelter.

Application for Variance—Former Jeffrey Amherst Textbook Annex

Mr. Malloy explained that he received an application for a variance for the former Jeffrey Amherst Textbook Annex, which is being converted to counseling offices. The architect and developer applied to the Architectural Access Board (AAB) to request that four of twelve offices in the building, separated by the main floor by a half floor, not be accessible due to the cost of installing an elevator to service approximately 400 square feet of office space. The application stated that the cost of installing an elevator would make the project financially unfeasible, and to accommodate customers, a fully accessible neutral public meeting room within the building would be available, as would be public restrooms.

Mr. Tringali suggested that if the offices are independent of one another, a neutral office would be necessary to meet with customers; and that the lease agreement would stipulate this condition. He also suggested that the offices provide flexible accommodation, such as meeting with a client in a public location of the client’s choosing.

Ms. Derin questioned whether an application for variance needed to be filed as the renovations would cost less than 1/3 the assessed value of the building, and did not necessitate ADA compliance. She, did however, recommend that at least one entrance be made accessible.

Mr. MacRostie noted that the structure is not of historical significance.

Ms. Barrelet had concerns about the availability of the neutral space (public meeting room) and its ability to be ready in short notice. This concern emphasized that only one neutral meeting room would try to accommodate four offices, and there may be scheduling conflicts for the room.

Mr. Tringali expressed that even if eight offices were accessible, that is eight more than existing currently in the Town Center. He also noted that the plan for the building shows three waiting rooms, which could be made accessible and used as temporary office space.

DAAC members voted to recommend the approval of the variance to the AAB with conditions: (1) a neutral meeting room be provided at all times on the main floor; a “trade” between tenants is not acceptable as the office may not be available on short notice, (2) there is at least one clearly visible accessible entrance, (3) the three waiting rooms, in addition to a neutral meeting room, be made accessible and available as temporary meeting space, and (4) any lease agreement between the property owner/manager and tenants explicitly states that the neutral rooms must be kept accessible and available at all times.

Private Parking Lots

Mr. Tringali described email correspondence with Mr. Dougan, Assistant Director for Community Services for the Massachusetts Office on Disability, which described a Massachusetts statute (MGL Ch.40 Sec.21 Subsection 23) that allows police to ticket vehicles illegally parked in HP parking spaces on private property. When a community adopts this statute, it is not necessary for the police or parking enforcement officer to contact the property owner before ticketing or towing a vehicle parked on private property.

Ms. Derin suggested that this statute be brought to Town Meeting, as it would apply town-wide and would be an enforceable measure; more efficient and easier than negotiating voluntary agreements with individual property owners.

Mr. Tringali mentioned that even without this statute, cars parking illegally in HP parking spaces can be photographed by citizens and ticketed if this photograph includes the license plate and HP parking sign, and is sent to the parking enforcement agency.

Ms. Barrelet expressed that more awareness and public outreach is needed to teach the public about the importance of HP parking spaces and that there are consequences for parking illegally.

Ms. Derin repeated stories where people tell her it is easy to receive HP parking placards for their cars; it does not require much work and there is not a rigorous screening of applicants.

Mr. Malloy agreed to research MGL 40 Sec. 21 and the process involved in bringing an article to Town Meeting. He also expressed that before bringing this to Town Meeting, it is important to conduct public outreach—meeting with property owners and the Chamber of Commerce—to keep citizens informed and gain their support for the article if it is voted upon at a future Town Meeting.

Community Development Block Grant Support Letter

Mr. Malloy explained that the DAAC does not need to write a support letter for the CDBG application, as there are no projects in the docket. The Town Engineer determined the sidewalks at the Pomeroy Village intersection and on Main Street to comply with the standards, meaning that CDBG money cannot be used for improvements.

Mr. Tringali suggested Amherst develop a ‘barrier removal program’ similar to Northampton’s “Yes we can” program, in which a revolving fund helps finance the removal of barriers by local businesses. He believed that in Northampton the maximum award is \$4,000.

Ms. Derin suggested that local churches need work and repairs, and that Amherst could benefit from a new accessible homeless shelter. Maplewood farms was cited as a potential location for the shelter as it has been vacant for some time and the building is accessible. The hotel at Amherst Crossing was also mentioned as a possible location for a homeless shelter.

Mr. MacRostie asked if North Pleasant and East Pleasant Streets would be improved as the crosswalks and curbs cuts are treacherous to walk across with large cracks and uneven pavement.

Ms. Rising expressed concern that in the winter, plowing of streets and clearing of sidewalks could be improved by Town and property owners to keep sidewalks clear and safely passable.

Mr. Malloy agreed to ask Mr. Rosenblatt, Director of Community Development, which activities would be eligible for CDBG money.

Emergency Contact Information

Mr. Malloy shared an email which described that the Bangs Community Center uses a free relay calling system provided by the Commonwealth in place of TTY devices. DAAC members expressed frustration that in the email, it stated that the relay calling services were used because of the high cost of installing TTY devices in each office.

Ms. Barrelet wanted to know if voice carry-over services were available for those who may be hearing impaired, but can speak and do not have vision impairment.

Ms. Derin asked if CDBG money could be used to purchase TTY devices and train Town employees.

Mr. Tringali believed that the Town Clerk, Police, Fire, and Library should all have TTY, especially for emergency preparedness.

Ms. Barrelet said she would check with the Police and Fire departments to determine if they have TTY.

Ms. Derin reiterated that the DAAC is pushing for Town offices to be more accessible, and TTY is one step in this process.

Jones Library HP Parking Space

Ms. Derin suggested the DAAC make an appointment with Ms. Isman, Jones Library Director, to discuss the HP parking space, which has an inadequate unloading area. If moving the curb and extending the paved area is not possible, Ms. Derin pondered whether all the parking spaces could be shifted toward the back of property to make the HP parking space comply with current regulations.

Seating at the High School Auditorium

The DAAC recommended the Town Manager and School Committee be contacted about seating at the auditorium because Mr. Bohonowicz, Director of Maintenance, has not responded to emails asking about HC seating in the High School auditorium.

Mr. MacRostie suggested we look at the as-built plans to determine the number and location of seats.

Ms. Derin repeated that the last time she attended an event in the auditorium, boxes blocked HC seating at the back of the auditorium and seating near the stage was unavailable because performers used it during the show.

DAAC members believe that providing adequate seating is essential for a community venue, especially if friends, relatives and family members from outside Amherst wish to attend performances at the High School.

Amherst Train Station

Mr. Tringali explained it may be time to send a letter to the Department of Justice and Department of Transportation to help mitigate the accessibility issues with the Amherst Train Station. This comment was made in response to Mr. Malloy describing his difficulty trying to speak with a representative from Amtrak. Mr Tringali did caution that the Dept. of Justice may not take the case.

Meeting Times

The next meeting will continue to take place in the main conference room at Stavros. The meeting will begin at 3:00 PM.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5:05 PM

Respectfully submitted,
Nathaniel Malloy, staff liaison